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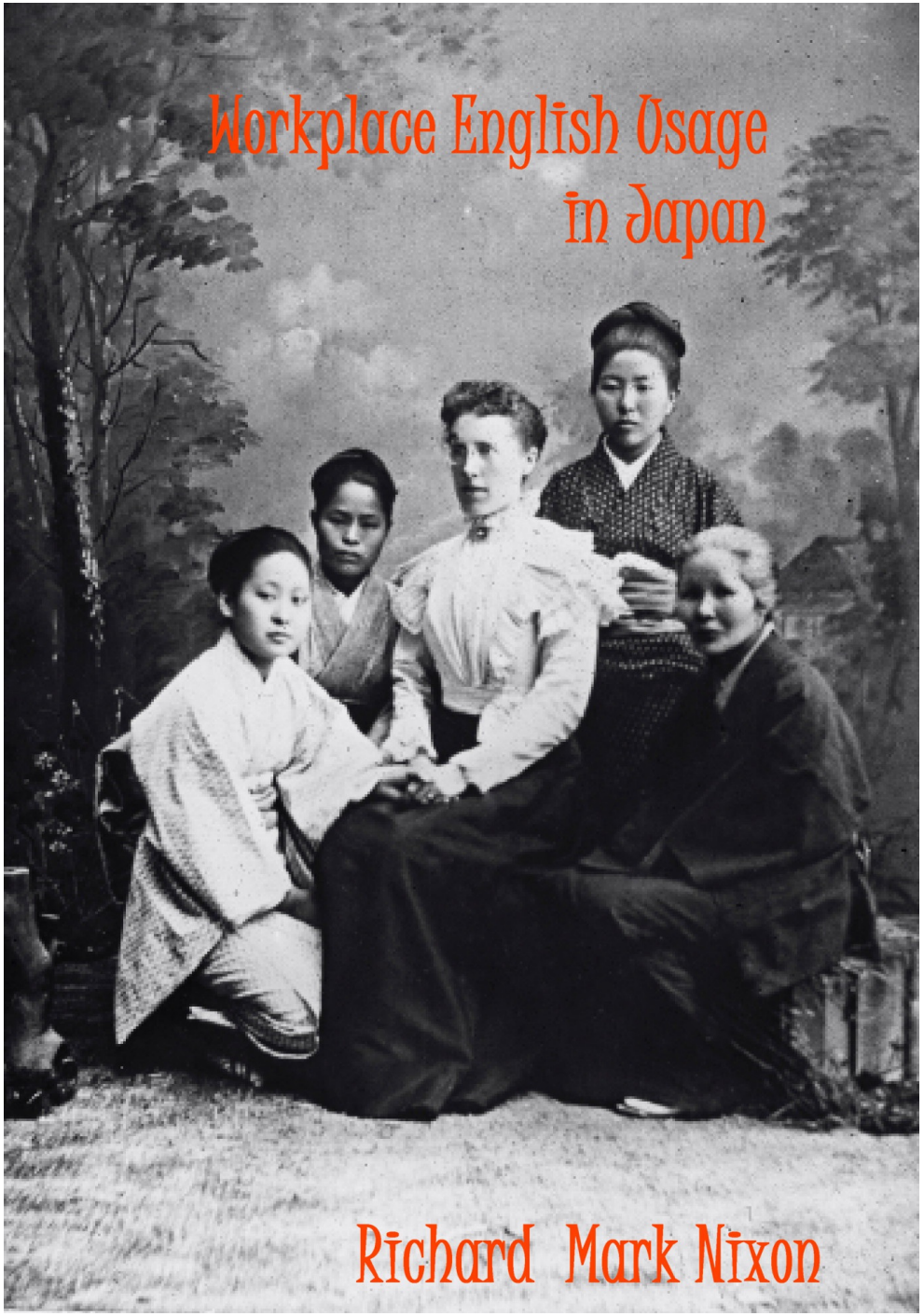

Workplace English Usage in Japan

by

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Workplace English Usage in Japan
Richard Mark Nixon Ph. D.

1 Introduction

Japanese employees who use English as a second language (L2) for communicative purposes are not usually expected to be as competent in the entire range of English productive and receptive skills as would a native speaker of the language. Rather, L2 English employees in Japan are expected to be competent in the use of certain specialized aspects or task types of English. In order to determine which task types and specific L2 target tasks are given the greatest priority by Japanese employees, the current study focuses on the purposes for which Japanese employees use their English in the workplace. A longitudinal study of English majors from a Japanese university focuses on the workplace English usage by the members of the last three years of graduating classes (63 participants) of a fourth year academic writing course. Questionnaire and interview data reveal that 20% to 30% of the participants use English in Japanese places of employment. For those Japanese participants who do use English in the workplace, the frequency of English usage and the variation in task types both correlate positively with the length of time since graduation.

Participants in this study seem to place priority on their ability to introduce the company and its products, make telephone calls, answer telephone calls, answer complaints, and reject proposals/give suggestions – all productive task types. These task types seem to be in contrast with previous research of English subject lecturers from universities in Japan, who believe that Japanese students will need English in the workplace to obtain information from the Internet, listen and understand native English, understand documents, understand emails and business letters, and understand manuals – all receptive task types**.**

Recent changes in the type and extent of English language usage in Japanese places of employment suggest that a revised vision of what is

needed for successful globalization is sweeping across the nation. Over the last three or four years several Japanese multinational corporations have adopted English as their official language. These companies view a complete change over to an English-only work environment — not only for satellite or branch offices located overseas, but also for headquarter offices located within the domestic marketplace as well—as being the only approach that will be successful if they wish to prosper in international markets.

1.2 The incentive approach

Softbank has taken an incentive-laden approach to encourage the use of English in their company. Rather than mandating a complete switch over to English, the cell phone carrier has offered employees incentives (Ryall, 2013). Employees can receive a 1 million yen payment if they are able to score 900 points or greater on the International Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). As a result, there has been a high level of participation by Softbank employees in the program: "The [incentive] system is not a requirement for employees and they do not have to take part if they do not want to … but most are very happy because they can get a bonus of they're good at English" (Ryall, 2013, para. 6).

1.3 The mandated approach

In February 2010, the founder and CEO of Rakuten, Hiroshi Mikitani, announced that English would be the official language of the corporation. Rakuten employees worldwide were required to be become sufficiently proficient in English by July 1st, 2012 (Harlan, 2012; Wakabayashi, 2012) in order to be capable of communicating in English during "… all internal presentations, documents and memos. In addition, all internal meetings, training sessions, and internal company emails [will need to be] written in English" (3).

In defense of his decision Mikitani stated that, "The Japanese economy and our GDP need this," adding that: "Japan accounted for 12 percent of the global economy in 2006, although that will have shrunk to 8 percent in 2020 and a mere 3 percent by 2050" (Ryall, 2013, Imperative for Japan section, Para. 2). The decision to mandate an English-only work environment represented a shift in policy for the company as previously the CEO had argued it would be too difficult to hold meetings and complete paperwork in any language other than Japanese. However, as Rakuten began to expand globally, the multinational company found it was taking on more non-Japanese university graduates who were unable to function in Japanese—as of January 2013, non-native Japanese employees comprised 30 percent of the total Rakuten workforce (Ryall, 2013).

2 The impact of an English-only approach

Japanese individuals working for companies that have totally adopted (or are in the process of transferring operations to) an all-English work environment may be impacted by a mixture of positive and negative experiences. This impact intertwines through work and personal life and fully understanding the totality of the potential effects is complex.

2.1 Negative impact of English-only for Japanese employees in the workplace

While English may have become a career necessity at companies such as Rakuten and Japanese clothing giant Uniqlo, thereby compelling stakeholders to expend significant energy in order to ensure successful implementation, the full impact on employees or hopeful employees of such firms has and continues to be understudied. Critics of the English-only policy have been aplenty, lining up to comment since the day of Mikitani's announcement of the move toward "Englishisation" (a term

coined by Mikitani to represent the corporate language shift at Rakuten). In particular, scholar Tatsura Uchida from Kobe College has been condemning of the recent moves by Nissan, Rakuten and Uniqlo to implement English as the official work language (Adopting English as workplace, 2011). Uchida suggests that—on a personal level—Japanese employees will invariably become demoralized at the daunting prospect of trying to manage under an English-only approach; as such, there will almost certainly be a negative impact on the quality of work being produced (Takahashi, 2010).

Perhaps of more concern, the implementation of the English only mandate creates a new kind of professional differentiation among Japanese employees that does not exist when they function in their native language. That is, the emerging differentiation between linguistically proficient English as Second Language (ESL) Japanese employees and those Japanese employees who lack such ability but may possess excellent professional skills painstakingly developed and refined over the years (Adopting English as workplace, 2011). As a result of the differentiation: "Competent workers without English competence are being marginalized or even dismissed from their jobs, while incompetent workers with good English proficiency are being promoted" (Takahashi, 2010).

This negative is magnified when an English-only language strategy is implemented haphazardly, is not easily adapted to local employee English proficiencies, and lacks a long term strategy—the net result being that "… many people lose the promotional path that they've spent their whole lives developing" (The advantages of English, 2013, para. 6). *Shukan Gendai*, the general-interest weekly magazine published by Kodansha, relates stories of a similar differentiation among Japanese journalists who have attained a higher level of English linguistic proficiency, but lack the kind of professional proficiency that comes from dedication to their craft (Adopting English as workplace, 2011).

The anecdotal stories gathered from interviews with newspaper editors suggest that (in the realm of journalism) linguistic proficiency and

professional proficiency are unlinked. While more Japanese journalists than ever possess English speaking skills they also lack the concomitant professional level reporting skills crucial for effective critical analysis. From *Shukan Gendai*: "People who grew up abroad and returned to Japan speaking native-speaker English get made a fuss over here, but when they're sent overseas, they don't cultivate sources or do legwork. They just translate stuff from the local papers and send it home. They make big money, and it's a complete waste" (Adopting English as workplace, 2011, para. 7).

The overall net effects of such inconsistencies in preferential treatment due to ability in English language proficiency have the potential to bring forth a multitude of unexpected employee difficulties. For example, in her comprehensive study of human relations within corporate offices from around the world—including such global Japanese conglomerates as Rakuten, Fast Retailing (which operates the Uniqlo fashion chain), car maker Honda and tyre maker Bridgestone (both of which only recently adopted the English only approach)—Tsedal Neeley of the Harvard Business School found that Anglisization "… can stir up a hornet's nest of emotions" (A growing number, 2014, para. 10) amongst employees. Her investigative report revealed that cliques of fluent and the non-fluent are likely to emerge after it becomes apparent who is and who isn't managing English well. Besides losing self confidence, slower second language learners are also likely to "… worry about their job security, clam up in meetings or join a guerrilla resistance that conspires in its native language" (A growing number, 2014, para. 10). As a result of potential office politics, Neeley advises companies that are considering an English-only mandate to tread lightly when planning their language policy as how such a policy is structured and implemented may impact detrimentally on relationship dynamics.

2.2 Negative impact of English-only policies on Japanese employees in their personal lives

When English as the official workplace language is implemented its effects invariably permeate beyond an individual's role as worker. For example, the lifestyle changes endured by employees of Rakuten's Anglisization policy verged on the edge of urban legend during the early days of the mandated Japanese to English language shift. Initially, without a structured plan of implementation as a guide, employees resorted to a variety of seemingly desperate measures to meet the two year English proficiency deadline. At the outset of the policy these employees were told they would be required to learn English on their own and no money or other resources such as books or native English language instruction would be provided to facilitate their task. Without any financial aid or professional linguistic assistance from the company, Rakuten employees scrambled for whatever pragmatic methods they deemed affordable and seemed doable. Some employees watched English movies in their free time, visited the foreign language sections of their local libraries, made their own flashcards, and even downloaded language apps onto their smart phones (Harlan, 2012). Excerpts from interviews conducted by the Rakuten five-person Anglisization planning team of its own employees were obtained and published by The Washington Post on August 12, 2012 (Harlan, 2012).

The interviews revealed that many of the employees were studying English wherever and whenever they could, such as on the train during the commute to and from work. Finally, when the company discovered in April of 2011 (more than a year after the mandate began) that the employee English proficiency test scores were only incrementally improving a decision was made to provide workers with some help. English classes were arranged in the mornings and evenings at the Rakuten corporate headquarters in a large conference room; however, despite this help, many employees concerned about their future at the

company could still be seen pouring over English study books during their midday lunch break.

3 Positive impact for workers and companies

Promotional opportunities and increased job market security are only two of the positives that individuals can realize when they take on more work responsibility that involves the use of English. A person who attains fluency in English is likely to gain more confidence and develop a feeling of security, both of which are important emotions to have amid a growing scarcity of well-paying jobs. When people become proficient in English, they also become more competent at the different kinds of work roles that require English communication. Becoming more versatile at work as a result of English proficiency can lead to greater income for Japanese workers, more advancement opportunities, and increased enjoyment and excitement for work (Hoare, 2012).

Beyond what one would consider essential purposes, English is becoming necessary in others areas of Japanese enterprise. For example, in the Arts, English is quickly becoming essential as a communicative tool for young aspiring and older established artists alike who wish to promote their artistry on an international stage. For an artist to have an agent who can communicate in English and promote an artist's work is of course important, but if the artist is also able to communicate in English then she/he is able to interact with other English speaking artists from around the world and the creative and business benefits are immeasurable. A case in point can be learned from the story of Katoro Sato, a 37 year old Japanese fashion designer who founded his own company, Cruce & Co. Now having gone global, Sato's firm sells his popular line of CD jackets and T-shirts worldwide. The artist claims none of his international success would have been possible without his knowledge of English.

On his success Sato remarked, "If I did not speak English, I could not have created this business'' (English ability in the workplace, 2014,

para. 6) and advised "I'd like to see more and more young people (in Japan) travel abroad rather than remaining tethered to their own country" (English ability in the workplace, 2014, para. 8). The fashion designer added that he has known several talented professionals from Japan who have had their careers stunted or have had to even abandon their careers due to the fact that they lacked English language skills.

The benefits of an English-only policy for Japanese companies will likely become more evident moving forward if one considers that future growth opportunities are less likely domestically but potentially quite attractive in overseas markets. Previously, English usage was regarded as best left solely to a Japanese company's international division; however, this notion is quickly being supplanted by a new approach which installs English in every division of operation, including the home market.

This approach was taken by Rakuten in 2010 and more recently by other Japanese corporations, including Toyota. According to Masami Doi, a graduate of Osaka University of Foreign Studies (now Osaka University), who worked for several years as a public relations officer for Toyota, found that most of the information being published today by global corporations is in English, and to have to translate documents into Japanese causes a time lag that puts Japanese companies at a distinct disadvantage. According to Doi, having English-proficient Japanese staff is paramount and the benefits are instantly realized: "If you understand English, you are able to digest large volumes of information in real time" (English ability in the workplace, 2014, para. 11). After the negative effects from the massive vehicle recall experienced by Toyota in 2009, Doi relates how foreign journalists who visit Toyota's plant operations in order to prepare news reports now listen to English presentations by Japanese engineers who can capably explain manufacturing processes, an impressive improvement that Doi suggests has positively impacted public perception overseas since the difficult days that followed the recall.

4 Strategies to improve implementation of English in the Japanese workplace

It seems the initiation of the use of English in the workplace will become inevitable at both Japanese companies wishing to remain global and succeed in foreign markets and Japanese companies currently focussed on the home front but wishing to expand internationally. How this changeover is conducted may well determine the future success of such companies. In either case, in order to avoid some of the pitfalls associated with a changeover to an English only policy, company officials need to listen to what their employees are saying and use a comprehensive language strategy that can be tailored to address employee needs (rather than one that merely imposes corporate will).

Companies also should realize that the changing over to an English only workplace is not (as Rakuten's CEO had promised) a two or three year process. Tsedal Neeley, who carefully observed the language changeover at Rakuten and provided Mikitani with strategic assistance during the initial years of implementation, noted that if a successful changeover really is the goal, then it is a much longer project than most companies realize; in fact, "… a four to 10-year odyssey with ongoing maintenance required thereafter" (Hoare, 2012, para. 16) can be expected. The reasons for a slower than expected implementation usually relate to the employees and the professional and personal difficulties they experience: "The problem is that teaching non-English speakers a new language risks drops in productivity, causes some employees to lose status, and can engender belief that they aren't as effective in their second tongue—all significant hurdles employers must overcome to make a program successful" (Girard, 2012, para. 7).

In order to avoid and if necessary overcome negative impacts a company needs to be proactive rather than reactive. In the case of Rakuten, the company initially entered the changeover to English without a comprehensive plan, and in the initial stages paid the price in terms of an

extremely frustrated and desperate workforce: "In line with a do-it-yourself culture, one early problem was that Rakuten offered little initial training or support to workers, who were expected to pay for their own English classes and learn during off-hours" (Girard, 2012, para. 11). Fortunately, with the assistance of outside professional assistance, the company reacted quickly to counteract employee frustration, starting with payment for language classes.

Besides what seems to be an obvious gesture of class payment for language instruction any company wishing to implement English needs to follow a clear strategic language plan that involves the following characteristics:

a. The strategy needs to receive full support at all levels of an organization: Not only the CEO but also all the managers and supervisors should be behind the policy so that employees, the ones being asked to convert their language, receive a strong unified message;

b. English language instruction/learning should not interfere with work: Employees in Japan are known to be dedicated and log long work hours. Language vendors need to carry out the instruction, not the workers seeking out ad hoc solutions. Also, the instruction needs to be dovetailed into the work day such that employees can continue to successfully carry out their duties;

c. Instruction should address the real needs of employees: Diagnostic tests should be conducted and individual instruction should then tailored to take into account a learner's English language strengths and weaknesses and the unique communicative demands of her/his particular job position;

d. Firms need to adopt a 100% switch over to English: Companies should ignore the temptation to adopt a bilingual approach as the redundancies alone will make this strategy terribly expensive and will also remove the

feeling of urgency that is needed to learn a second language. Also, relying only on incentive programs will not lead to sustainable English language acquisition;

e. Companies need to include native English speaking (NES) employees in the process: NES employees need to make concessions to ESL Japanese employees by modifying their English output when necessary with the goal being successful communication for all; and,

f. A zero tolerance language policy needs to be implemented: Such a policy should be stressed to ensure employees realize English-only will remain as the permanent language of communication. (characteristics based on Hoare, 2012)

5 Current state of English proficiency in Japan

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) mean test scores for reading and listening places Japan at 40 out of the 48 countries involved in ETS' 2013 Report on Test Takers Worldwide. Approximately 40% of these test takers were in the age range of 21 and 25 (Report on test takers, 2013); meaning young Japanese people entering into the prime of their job hunting careers are not placing high on one of the most prominent international English tests. In terms of a direct comparison to 36 other Asian countries, the 2013 Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) iBT test, an integrated assessment of the four English language skills, reveals that Japanese test takers again did not fare well, with only the countries of Cambodia, Tajikistan, and Timor-Leste receiving aggregate English skill scores lower than those of the Japanese test takers (Test and score summary, 2013).

At the time of his widely publicized announcement in 2010 that Rakuten would be adopting English as the official language the CEO of the company, Hiroshi Mikitani, boldly stated: "Japanese study more than

3,000 hours of English … [a]nd when you study more than 3,000 hours of English and you cannot speak English, there is a huge issue. It's a huge waste of time" (Harlan, 2012, para. 20). Further to his point, at the time of the initial 2010 Anglisization announcement a mere 10 percent of the over 7,000 Rakuten employees could function in English, this according to the in-house two-hour 200 question reading and listening test of business English conducted by the company (Girard, 2012).

However, a mere two years later (in May 2012) three of Rakuten's six senior executives in the engineering section were not Japanese, half of the entire workforce were able to regularly communicate in internal communication in English, and "25% communicate in English with partners and coworkers in foreign subsidiaries on a regular basis" (Neeley, 2012, para. 4).

6 Japanese university graduates should anticipate using English in the workplace

Japanese university graduates would be better prepared to use English in their jobs if educators were aware of the kind and extent of English communication they will be using. English usage varies according to company size, product or service type, and extent of international interaction. When Hiroshi Mikitani announced plans to shift his company to an English only environment, Honda CEO Takanobu Ito criticized the move, stating that it was "… *stupid* for a company to use primarily English when its workforce was mostly Japanese" (Harlan, 2012, para. 10). Mikitani defended the English as an official language policy arguing the decision is highly dependent upon the type of business operation a company has: "The nature of our business is totally different … Honda manufactures a hardware item and Rakuten deals with users on the internet" (Lah, 2010, para. 6).

Mikitani added "If you want to become successful in other countries, you need to internationalize the headquarters" (Lah, 2010, para.

11). Ironically, three years after Takanobu Ito had chastised Mikitani for adopting the English-only approach, Japanese language was in the midst of being phased out at the car maker in favor of English (Joseph, 2013). It is easily recognized that: 1) the odds are becoming greater that young Japanese university graduates will need to communicate in English as part of, if not all of, their work duties; and 2) the best way to assist current university students to this end is to gauge the kind and type of English presently being used in businesses.

7 An inquiry into workplace English usage in Japan

Surveys designed specifically for Japanese college/university graduates in order to determine the extent of their workplace English usage are rare; moreover, those that have been conducted suffer from a variety of methodological issues, or are simply outdated. For example, a 2008 survey of Japanese college graduates of computer science and computer engineering found that a majority of the respondents used English for reading technical manuals and instructions for installations, the sending of emails, faxes, and business letters (Kaneko, E., Rozycki, W., and Orr, T.).

Unfortunately, due to the low response rate (only 17.4% of the 899 surveyed completed and returned the questionnaire), making any kind of generalization based on the results impossible. Another investigation into the state of written business communication in English conducted at Aoyama Gakuin University and presented at the 5th Asia-Pacific Conference of the Association for Business Communication (Someya, 2005) revealed that business English is undergoing fundamental changes due to accelerated advances in technology and globalization.

The survey featured a solid list of questionnaire items that registered both practical and affective, or emotional aspects, associated with workplace English. For example, the study found that: 1) 82% of the respondents believed that English was an absolute necessity in their work; and 2) English writing was by far the most needed English skill used by

the respondents. But again because of a low response rate (73/300 or 24.3%) and the age of the survey period (July to October 2004), one cannot invest confidence in the conclusions the study drew.

8 Conclusion

With a lack of data due to the fast paced changes that are occurring in the workplace, and due to a lack of current research studies to inform educators, it is difficult to gain adequate knowledge of the kinds of English language challenges that students need to expect in their job positions. What is needed are comprehensive studies that begin with recent graduates and continue longitudinally over time in order to determine: 1) how they initially started out in the workforce with their English usage; and 2) how this changes as they move into more secure higher position jobs over time.

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